

Focus | IN DEPTH

Paving the road to relief

By JIM RADCLIFFE
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

One troubled street. Three visions to fix it. And \$31.5 million to do it all.

Born as a wagon trail, El Toro Road is one of Orange County's busiest streets, connecting Laguna Beach and Trabuco Canyon. It is crippled by traffic congestion and - in parts - home to aging strip malls with numerous empty storefronts. "It's a traffic nightmare," said Mike Davies, 34, chief financial officer for a Lake Forest firm. "It's always a mess."

Lake Forest city officials look into the future and see a Main Street USA, with cars zipping along and 8-foot-wide meandering sidewalks with shoppers strolling in and out of thriving ice-cream shops, bookstores and movie theaters.

Laguna Hills envisions its little bit of El Toro as a gathering point in the style of old downtowns, something the community's developers left out. And Laguna Woods sees a concrete boardwalk, where senior citizens can walk with plenty of elbow room without fear of the rushing traffic now just feet away. To varying degrees, the cities will be landscaping, medians and pilasters to try to fulfill their concepts.

LAKE FOREST

The linchpin of the city's \$27 million repair job is the addition of a fourth lane in each direction for a mile between Jutewood Place and the San

Three cities will spend \$31.5 million in search of concrete-and-asphalt nirvana on El Toro Road.

Diego (I-5) Freeway.

Various turn pockets will be added, too. As will a traffic-signal system that - via embedded sensors - can tell where vehicles are and turn lights green or red so the most motorists possible are on the move.

"It's a traffic nightmare. It's always a mess."

MIKE DAVIES, 34, CFO FOR A LAKE FOREST FIRM, ABOUT CONGESTION ON EL TORO ROAD

About 250 trees and 3,000 shrubs will rise from 60,000 square feet of fresh landscaping - 20 times what is there today. Sidewalks built for strolling will be added.

Westrust, a development company, plans to raze sagging, 270,000-square-foot Saddleback Valley Plaza and replace it with a new center, says President Charlie Smith. "It is a perfect complement to what we have planned."

LAGUNA HILLS

The El Toro-Paseo de Valencia intersection will be widened to add turn pockets in all directions. Motorists heading toward the freeway will pick up a fourth lane for nearly a quarter-mile. El Toro's busiest stretch with 61,000 vehicles daily. Like Lake Forest, Laguna Hills hopes that refurbishing El

Toro will persuade successful chain stores to move in. The city's urban village would center around the El Toro-Regional Center Drive intersection.

Preliminary plans have the Laguna Hills Mall Saddleback Memorial Medical Center and other businesses forming the village's foundation. A 200-plus room hotel, additional retail, office and residential buildings, and grassy areas for concerts would be added.

LAGUNA WOODS

Improvements in this city - largely the Leisure World retirement community - will include real-time traffic sensors like Lake Forest's.

The crux of the project is a 4-foot-wide landscaped buffer next to El Toro Road's south side, with the sidewalk wid-

ened to 14 feet. In one spot, it's as skinny as 3 feet, 3 inches - forcing seniors too close to busy traffic.

Maxine Putnam, 66, returning from a grocery store the other day, said she'd prefer a leafy, roomy walkway: "We'd love it."

El Toro Road information for Lake Forest only: (949) 461-3592; the city also has a Web site for the project: www.theartor.info

Average daily car trips (both directions):
45,000
Rockfield to Jutewood:
50,000
Rockfield to Bridger:

Businesses removed:
Six businesses, including three gas stations at this intersection, will be removed.

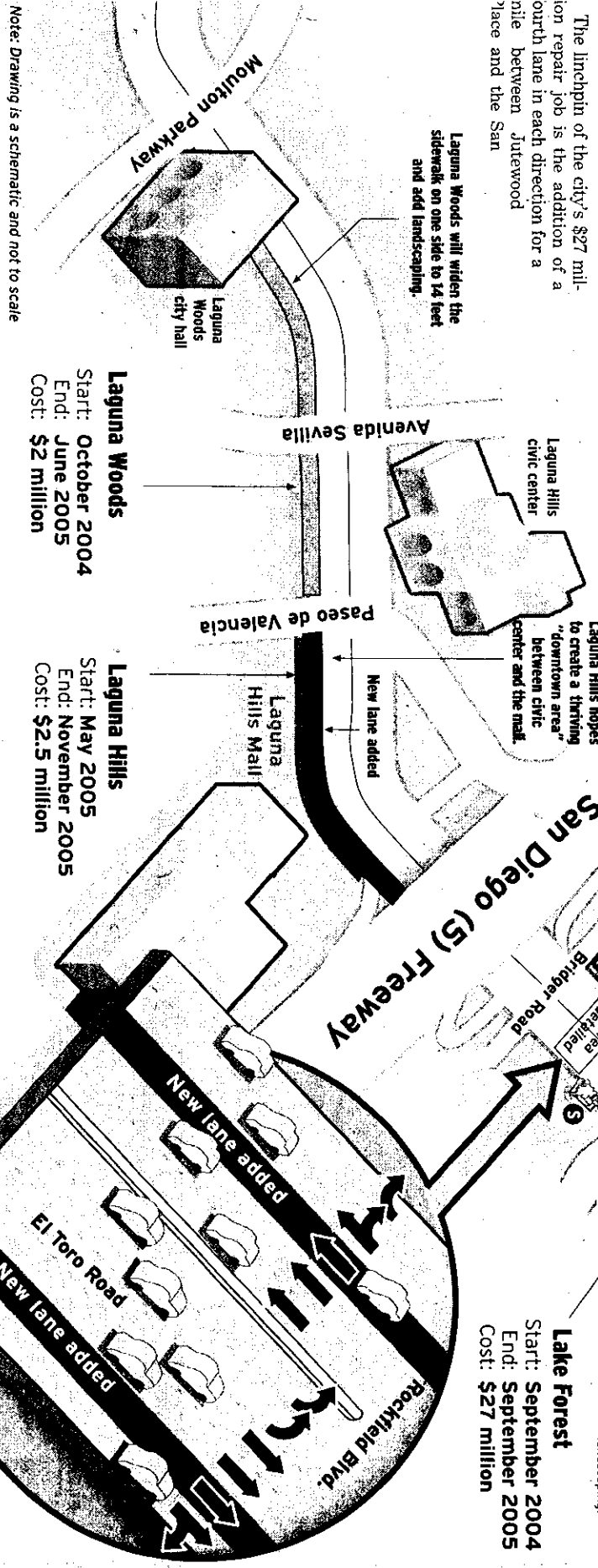
Washington Mutual building

Area detailed

Start: September 2004
End: September 2005
Cost: \$27 million

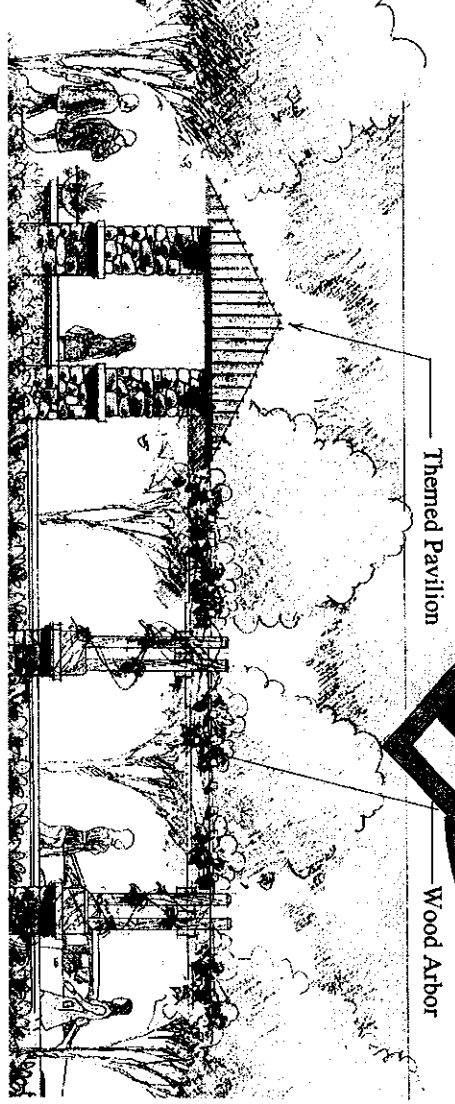
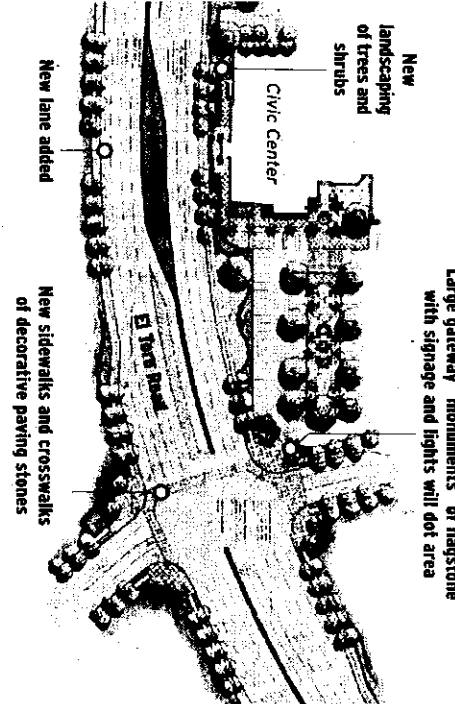
Seating niches: These small shaded areas are meant to create a pedestrian-friendly environment.

Arbors: These more elaborately designed areas include overhead shade and colorful landscaping.



Laguna Woods
Start: October 2004
End: June 2005
Cost: \$2 million

Laguna Hills
Start: May 2005
End: November 2005
Cost: \$2.5 million



Laguna Hills intends to create a "downtown" area near civic center.

Lake Forest wants to create an "arbor motif" along El Toro, revitalizing it as a shopping district.

Reporting by Jim Radcliffe; graphic by Scott Brown / The Register